

THE MEASURE

A JOURNAL OF POETRY



The Story of Poe's "*Bells*" - - - - -
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The Story of Poe's "Bells"

By HERVEY ALLEN

(Author of *Earth Moods*, and *Israfel* *)

DESPITE the great mass of Poe's work in both prose and poetry, work which if completely assembled would easily fill twelve to fifteen good-sized volumes, the tradition that most of his better known stories and poems, particularly the latter, were composed under the influence of drugs or alcohol still holds the popular imagination. The man in the street still insists that your great genius composes without effort, rapidly, and on a sudden inspiration, running his hands through his hair, and rolling the well-known eye in a fine frenzy. Poe himself, a master builder of a personal legend, if there ever was one, has himself contributed to such an impression in the main, although he laid emphasis on his reasoning powers in the carefully elaborated and highly artificial description of "How I wrote '*The Raven*.'"

The truth is, of course, far different. No poet put his verse through a more careful and extensive system of revisions than Edgar Allan Poe. There was always some personal experience behind his poems, only a few of which are "literary,"—the rest of his method of composition after the first impulse or inspiration was a process of years of revision with constant republication over a series of years in various public prints. Part of this process was to call attention to his work by reiteration in print and to realize as often as possible on one manuscript, a custom that in his time was almost universal, but the main reason was the dissatisfaction of genius with anything

**Israfel, the Life of Edgar Allan Poe*, by Hervey Allen, will be published by Doran this fall.

short of perfection. A study of Mr. J. H. Whitty's collection of the "Complete Poems"—(Houghton Mifflin), will easily verify this statement, and supply a text of considerable value to any young poet learning his craft. The book mentioned is the only complete and satisfactory edition of Poe's poems extant. The substantial volume of the work will prove a surprise to those who think that Poe's harvest was a scant one in verse.

In the Ingram papers, which have recently been acquired by the University of Virginia, there is an extract from the Diary of Marie Louise Shew, one of the Literati, and a close friend of Poe, from which the following account, certainly authentic, of the genesis of the "*Bells*" is for the most part taken:

In the early summer of 1848, shortly after the death of Poe's wife Virginia, the poet was much at the house of Mrs. Shew. She lived in New York close to a church provided with the usual bells. Poe had helped Mrs. Shew in choosing the furniture and decorations for her new music room and library, and was a constant visitor at the house where he found the physical and spiritual comfort of hospitality and feminine companionship on an intellectual plane which he so much craved. One evening, probably in June 1848, he paid a call. He had been drinking about that time, had heart disease and a lesion of the brain, a combination of causes that rang down the curtain on Baltimore a few months later—1849. On the particular evening when he happened in at Mrs. Shew's he appears to have been near to one of those periods of collapse that so frequently overtook him.

Poe and Mrs. Shew retired to a little conservatory overlooking a garden, where they had tea. He complained to his hostess that he had to write a poem, but had no inspiration. Mrs. Shew, to help him, brought pen, ink, and paper, and while they sat there the sound of church bells filled the air, and fell almost like a blow of pain on Poe's hypersensitive ears and jangled nerves. He pushed the paper away saying, "I so dislike the noise of bells to-night, I cannot write. I have no subject. I am exhausted." Mrs. Shew then wrote on the paper, "*The bells, the little, silver bells*"—and Poe finished a stanza, again almost relapsing into a state of coma. Mrs. Shew then urged him again, beginning a second stanza with "*The heavy iron bells.*" Poe finished two more stanzas, heading them "*by Mrs. L. M. Shew,*" after which he was completely unable to proceed. After supper he

was taken upstairs and put to bed, where he appears to have lapsed into a coma. Mrs. Shew was a professional nurse of considerable medical and hospital experience. She called a Dr. Francis, who had probably attended Poe before at a city dispensary—in 1837?—Dr. Francis and Mrs. Shew sat by the bedside and noted his symptoms. The pulse was very weak and irregular, and caused the doctor to say, "He has heart disease, and will die early in life." Mrs. Shew had previously noted the symptoms also. Both of them felt that Poe was nearly dying, and that he was close to the verge of insanity. He remained the night. Mrs. Clemm had been informed of his condition, and the next day came to take him home to Fordham. He himself did not seem to realize his danger. The end was indeed near.

During the remainder of 1848 and part of 1849 the poem went through many revisions. Three versions of it are known before it made its final public appearance in Sartain's *Union Magazine* for November 1849, with the following notice: "There is a curious piece of literary history connected with this poem. . . . It illustrates the gradual development of an idea in the mind of a man of original genius. This poem came into our possession about a year since—(December 1848). It then consisted of *eighteen lines!* They were as follows:

The Bells.—A Song
The bells!—hear the bells!
The merry wedding-bells!
The little silver bells!
How fairy-like a melody there swells
From the silver tinkling bells
Of the bells, bells, bells!
Of the bells!

The bells!—ah, the bells!
The heavy iron bells!
Hear the tolling of the bells!
Hear the knells!
How horrible a melody there floats
From their throats—
From their deep-toned throats!
How I shudder at the notes
From the melancholy throats
Of the bells, bells, bells!
Of the bells!

About six months after this we received the poem enlarged and altered nearly to its present size and form, and about three months

since, the author sent another alteration and enlargement, in which condition the poem was left at the time of his death." This kind of revision was typical of Poe's method.

The poem, however, was not of such a sudden birth as Mrs. Shew imagines. Space forbids, or it would be possible to show that the poet had long contemplated writing a poem on the subject. Chateaubriand's "*Genie du Christianisme*," a source from which Poe "pilfered" a number of items, suggests a poem on the subject of bells, and a clipping found in Poe's note-book from Poulson's Philadelphia *American Daily Advertiser*, an obscure sheet, supplied the following—

"Bells were first brought into use by St. Paulinus, Bishop of Nola, (409), in the Campania of Rome: hence a bell was called Nola or Campagnia. At first they were called saints: hence *toc-saint*, or *toc-sin*, in process of time. But Pliny reports that, many ages before his time, bells were in use, and called *Tintinnabula*. . . etc., etc."

The inference is plain. It seems more truly the mark of a great creative mind that out of such dust as this Poe was able to seize the nugget of the word which most people suppose him to have coined. It was from such dry sources that the inspiration came, and not from the bottle.

4.

Hear the tolling of the bells —
Iron bells!—

What a world of solemn thought their monody compels!

In the silence of the night

How we shiver with affright

At the melancholy ^{menace} meaning of their tone!

For every sound that floats

From ^{the rust within their} ~~out their~~ ghostly throats

Is a groan.

And the people — ah, the people
^{they that sleep} ~~who live up~~ in the steeple

A Prayer to Time

FROM your bleak sky come flying
Swift days like steady snows
To bury deep my treasure—
Bright leaves and youth's red rose.

Under that cold white cover
Smooth green hopes with the brown,
Only my hill of sorrow
Time, do not level down.

The Sky

DEAR GOD, let me believe it is a bowl
Painted in blue with cloud and star
Patterned by giants, that were better far
Than seeing crowded worlds, packed soul on soul.

Elizabeth Morrow

New England

STEEPLES are sharp
Like eager prayers
That they may prick
The sky!

Anne Morrow

Broomstick

“I RIDE through the sky on a ragged broom
When stars light up my way;
But wrapped up close in a thunder cloud
I pass the stupid day.

“I laugh at life and jeer at love
With a thrill of agony;
And the death of a man is no more nor less
Than the death of a frog to me.”

She swoops down to a window
And stops awhile to stare;
Two lovers sit before the fire
And the maid has golden hair.

The rain beats down and the wind roars high
And the witch throws in a moan;
The lovers cling and tremble
But the hag rides off alone.

Who's to know what a witch may think
As she hurtles through the air?
Who's to know but her coarse grey mat
Once was golden hair?

Revenge

I 'LL dream of the stars and seven seas
The wind with whirring wings;
Sigh for buried treasures—
Hear every bird that sings.

I'll send my fancy flying
Far into the blue;
Oh, I shall be too busy
To think at all of you!

Compensation

I SOMETIMES think the dearest love
Walks hand in hand with pain;
Today is all the sweeter
That will not come again.

And we who know our love must fade
Swift as a falling star;
I think that we are gentler
Than other people are.

Sara Owen

Family

I HAVE so many brothers
And so little bread
That no repentance smothers
The words I've never said:
There would be more for others
If some of us were dead—
Not my death but another's
The hot thought in my head.

Elisabeth Thomas

Sea-Surface

A PPEARANCE, only, I give to you,
Appearance, as of sea,
The surface of a changing blue
Wherewith you sample me.

But seven under-miles remain,
Green-flowered, silver-finned;
They store the wind, and sun, and rain,
And rain, and sun, and wind.

Madness

I COULD go mad tonight and scream aloud
To every beggar whistling in a crowd
That I am lonely here, lonely and proud;
I could fight Dark and slap the cheek of Chill,
And drown their puny protests with a shrill
"Be damned!" and if they dared to whimper, kill.
Then I would vow what no one ever vowed,
I'd step into my room as into a shroud,
Leaving the darkness at the window cowed.
I'd taunt the supine bed, insult the sill,
And batter with my fists until . . . until. . .
I could go mad tonight—perhaps I will!

Portrait

WAS it a constancy of wind that kept
His honor clean? a wind that sweeps one spot
Reduces excess ego to a dot
That isn't there. It says to all except
The babblers and the flagrantly inept
"Honor's the thing!—when honor is forgot
A man is ready to die and ready to rot!"
My father was a man the winds had swept.

His business was not law as some suppose,
Who think a soul is made of molecules:
His business was constructing, day by day,
An immortality—for there are those
Who build it tile on tile, and there are fools
Who strenuously piddle it away!

Virginia Moore

Stars

ACROSS the gulf, across the gulf, they burn,
Antares, and Arcturus, and Altair,
Vega and Spica. Everywhere I turn
I see stars netted in the heavens' hair.

In patterns of an arrow, of a crown,
A wain, a jeweled lyre, a flying swan,
Up to the zenith, from the zenith down,
The heavenly procession winds till dawn.

In silence, silence.—Sound, grown cricket-shrill,
On that rock-crystal stillness breaks and shatters.
And suddenly the dark road over the hill
Leads nowhere—or nowhere that really matters.

The Great Bull-Thistle

THE great bull-thistle, standing up alone,
Prepares to bloom and sends a summons out:
Hearing that purple hail, that trumpet blown,
The butterflies run on it with a shout
Too fine for ears, and cling and crowd and jostle;
The ranging bee finds here the thing he hunts
(Oh would he now could sing out like a throstle!),
And all together batten, seven at once.

The great bull-thistle, when the summer dies,
Shall send out on the air on lighter wings
A lighter crowd than this, before the eyes
Of crows and woodchucks sharp for other things.
The great bull-thistle, when the winter nips
The pasture, shall be impotent to sting;
The great bull-thistle shall be only strips
Of burnt-out paper in the fire of spring.

Abbie Huston Evans

Traveler's Tale

THE traveler returned said: "It was strange,
The city that I saw; for there at night
The air flowers into letters made of light
As if the coloured stars had earthly range
Down from the midnight pastures of their grange.
It is a city that is, doubly, full
Of ugly things, and of things beautiful,
And iron and dreams are sold upon its 'change.'"

The traveler said: "It has a burning bush
That flames, nor is consumed, and in the rain
That light is doubled in the pave again.
Great emeralds or rubies start or hush
Wheels of its avenues by day and night."
He said: "It is a city ruled by light."

Isabel Fiske Conant

Washington, D. C.

THIS city is alive with laughing dead
Parading up and down the avenue
Their footfalls have been able to endure
With the unlaughing adjective, the dread
And reverent "historical." The tread
Of gay men beribboning impromptu
Lives echoes through the din of parvenu
That will be "history" when time has fled.

Cocked-hatted men and coyly bonneted
Ladies walk here and there and tip and bend
And glitter as they pass into the twist
Of streets that lead to drollery and bed:
Leaving the shadow-worshippers to blend
More solemnly into the chuckling mist. . . .

N. Bryllion Fagin

Little White Church

LITTLE white church, I walk your way
For a peep in your heart today.

Oh, smell of the cool, the mold, the must!
Candles ripen, rust;

Over the stone where a foot has trod
Echoes break their pod.

But who is that fellow who hawks his ware?
What is *he* doing there?

*Stranger, that is the Parson Smizer,
God's own advertiser.*

Oh, look in the loft how spiders spin
Their trembling shadows in!

Little white church, so sweet your mien!
But who are these folk that preen?

*Stranger, these are the lucky seven
Holding the deeds to heaven.*

Little white church, pray tell no more;
Swing, little white door!

Mildred Plew Merryman

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Dark Fire, Black Music

Roan Stallion, Tamar and other Poems. By Robinson Jeffers. Boni & Liveright, New York.

THERE can be no question about conceding to the author of "Roan Stallion" and "Tamar" an electric vitality, a flair for rapid and pungent precision in epithet and phrase, a sensuous gusto, an idiomatic savour, a narrative intensity. These qualities have stirred comment and stimulated certain hearts of controversy. It is more than probable that these qualities will survive the dust and heat.

But in the general clamor of approval which this book, since its augmented resurrection, has aroused, many noble citizens who had cried "Plaudite Omnes!" have translated that enthusiastic threat into "Applaud Everything!" It is a pity, but we cannot comply with their wishes. 'Od's bodkins, what would you have us do! Palpitate over every catastrophe, exclaim upon each incestuous tableau, murmuring, "This, ah, this is Greek!"

No, thank you! We have had enough of this talk of tendencies and parallels and cloudy derivations. Certainly we are not going to de-throne Zeus and crown Whirl king, and all to twist for a most native and unindebted head another alien garland. Here, if ever, is a man after Sallust's remark upon Cato that the less he invited glory the more he acquired it. Let him remain beyond the little noise and strife of tongues in the arena. For, whatever Jeffers is or is not, he

is incontrovertibly himself, his very voice, stemming neither from that rugged voluptuary, Mr. Whitman, nor from the Peloponnesian pack (though he is drenched to the bone with both); but rather from the granite and solitary hills of his own hermitage in north-west California, the pines of Carmel and the sea-fogs on Carmel Bay, and something stark and strong and as delicate as color or pity and remorselessly beautiful in his own insides. In other words, by the grace of God and the neglect of men, by some Greek tragedians and some poets of the world and a rocky sequestration and bitter work, Jeffers has beaten out of his individual bowels the dark fire and the black music which is "Tamar" and, in a more urgent and stripped sense, "Roan Stallion." It is a statured tribute to his art that, while often weak and occasionally maudlin in episode and episodic strategy, his galloping lines possess momentum sufficient to sweep the reader over the hazards and beyond even the shambles of the final stretch.

We cannot help feeling that the rhymed affairs are flat. "The Coast-Range Christ," for all the savage splendor in spots, clicks its couplets like shackles. But there is always "Roan Stallion." And there is always "Tamar." And we can forgive the animal ferocity of detail, we can almost forget—though we shall wonder why he had to have them anyhow—the dramatis personæ of idiots and paralytics and nymphomaniacs—with passages like these crying in our ears:

*O swiftness of the swallow and strength
Of the stone shore, brave beauty of falcons,
Beauty of the blue heron that flies
Opposite the color of evening
From the Carmel River's reed-grown mouth
To her nest in the deep wood of the deer
Cliffs of peninsular granite engirdle,
O beauty of the fountains of the sun
I pray you enter a little chamber,
I have given you bodies, I have made you puppets,
I have made idols for God to enter
And tiny cells to hold your honey. . . .*

—*Joseph Auslander*

Despite Colleges

The Arts Anthology—Dartmouth Verse, 1925, (Introduction by Robert Frost)

*Amherst Undergraduate Verse. Compiled by David Morton.
Sunrise and Song—Paul Francis Webster.*

DESPITE the fact which Frost notes that "school and college have been conducted with the almost express purpose of keeping him (the young poet) busy with something else till the danger of his ever creating anything is past," we have with us yearly the undergraduate poet. And because he is often later the graduate poet, we must welcome him with not too severe a criticism. As an instructor I have long since learned that students become masters, that sheer youth is the force behind much lyric poetry; consequently, I have no desire to be over-critical. Moreover both Frost and Morton warn me against such procedure, and they are very right.

Robert Frost himself gives almost complete review of the Dartmouth volume when he says:

"Now the manner of a poet's germination is less like that of a bean in the ground than of a waterspout at sea. He has to begin as a cloud of all the other poets he ever read. And first the cloud reaches down toward the water from above and then the water reaches up toward the cloud from below and finally cloud and water join together to roll as one pillar between heaven and earth. The base of water he picks up from below is of course all the life he ever lived outside of books. . . ."

"These then, are the three figures of the waterspout and the first is about as far as the poet doomed to die young in everyone of us usually gets. . . . If he were absolutely certain to do as doomed and die young, he would hardly be worth getting excited about in college or elsewhere. But you can't be too careful about whom you will ignore in this world. Right in this book he will be found surviving into the second figure of the waterspout, and, by several poems and many scattered lines, even into the third figure."

After reading the volume carefully, I find I must agree with Frost's classification. A. K. Laing's, *For a Salvationist*, R. G. Eberhart's, *The Village Daily*, and A. W. Edson's, *The Ski-Jumper* are

certainly in the second group. They are original, much more than even very clear echoes. *The Ski-Jumper* is the most dramatic.

*If my ski should deviate an inch
From that hard, smooth icy track
Far below,
Glistening a steel gray in the dim December light—
If a thong should snap—
Or if my senses, reeling at the dizzy speed,
Should fail me in that headlong swoop
Far down the trestle—
There would be a sudden lunge,
And the sharp snap of hickory on steel,
And the heavy impact of flesh on ice, and a faint
Crunching of bone—*

*And the crowd way down below would gasp,
And then be hushed:*

*And a cloud of tiny snowflakes would gently settle
On a warm green jersey,
And melt—
But Hell! That's what makes it interesting.*

Richmond A. Lattimore whose *Underneath Sleep* is, according to Frost, the pillar "revolving pretty much unbroken" is undoubtedly the outstanding poet of this collection. His *Threnody* is a lovely elegy; *Underneath Sleep* has sincere lyric passion and beauty of language and form.

Although there is no Richmond Lattimore in the book of Amherst Verse, we find instead, as we should expect, some well-wrought sonnets. David Morton maintains that he has not influenced these young poets; he forgets that his young poets must read him with admiration. I do not mean that there is any imitation here—not at all, but there *are* many sonnets. Perhaps this is because college poets *always* write sonnets. Those of Sheridan Gibney have ease and grace. This is one of the best:

*I shall go forth with the silver-footed dawn,
Trailing a momentary path that clings
Like foamy wake to the ocean's laborings—
One instant graven then forever gone.
There will be blackbirds in the early corn:
The rustle of pale fright, a whirl of wings,
The curved swoop triumphant, airy rings
And a dark cloud narrowing beyond the bourn.*

*But from Nawadock's summit where a pine
Keeps lonely vigilance over the sea
One backward eye like the others shall I cast:
And lo! birds hold again the seeded mine,
High sun blots out the trail that followed me,
And none shall ever know that I have passed!*

Other good poems are Gerald B. Woodruff's *Shades*, a quiet picture well painted, and the first part of *Two of Us Went Wandering* by F. Curtis Canfield is interesting. But the very best poem is *Heaven* by Edmund K. Graves. Here again is originality.

*I know a person who wants to be buried
Under the old stone wall in our pasture,—
The place where every spring
Petals fall from the apple tree
And cover it with a creamy sheet
Touched here and there with pink
Or green where the moss shows through:
Where the grass is always pale and tender,
Where the cows lie down at noontime
Solemnly to chew their cud,
Where chipmunks wean their young on apple seeds.*

The rest is not quite so good, but this is almost a poem in itself. And now I must be a little unkind. However Mr. Webster is "very, very young" and his first book need not damn him. First books are often serious mistakes and *Sunrise and Song* is in that category. It should never have been printed, at least not for a public other than the poet's family. The verse is badly imitative of almost everything—imperfect in structure, in idea, even in grammar. There are good lines, but they are very difficult to find and searching is tedious. Mr. Webster has escaped, I fear, the better part of college tradition, but not the worst.

—Eda Lou Walton.

Books Received

Scarlet and Mellow. By Alfred Kreymborg.
Boni and Liveright.

Episodes and Epistles. By W. L. Thomas Seltzer.

Along the Wind. By Chard Powers Smith. Yale
University Press.

Poems. By Mabel Simpson. Harold Vinal.

Blind Men. By A. B. Shiffirin. Harold Vinal.

Trail Sketches. By Stuart Falconer Forbes.
Christopher Publishing House.

Just from Kentucky. By Harvey H. Fuson. John
H. Morton Co.

Heritage. By Mollie Anderson Haley. Dorrance.

Provincetown Sonnets. Antoinette deCourcy
Scudder Dorrance.

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